

Message Text

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ORIGIN NEA-03

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /004 R

66613

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APPROVED BY: NEA/ARN:DAKORN

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R 101342Z MAR 75

FM SECSTATE WASHDC

TO AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 052676

BEIRUT POUCH BAGHDAD

FOLLOWING REPEATS STATE 052676 ACTION ABU DHABI DOHA JIDDA KUWAIT
MANAMA MOGADISCIO MUSCAT SANAA ADDIS ABABA CAIRO DAMASCUS KHARTOUM
TRIPLI ALGIERS TUNIS MARCH 8TH

QUOTE

C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 052676

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PINS, ET, XF

SUBJECT: THE WAR IN ERITREA

REFS: (A) MUSCAT 153 (NOTAL) (B) SANA'A 471 (NOTAL)

1. REFTELS REQUESTED INFORMATION ON IDEOLOGICAL
MAKE-UP OF THE ERITREAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT AND THEIR
PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS IN THEIR STRUGGLE WITH GOVERNMENT
OF ETHIOPIA TO PASS ON TO HOST GOVERNMENTS.

2. MOVEMENT CONSISTS OF ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT (ELF),
SOMETIMES IDENTIFIED AS "ELF-REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL" AND
POPULAR LIBERATION FORCES (PLF). PLF ORIGINATED AS OFF-
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SHOOT OF ELF IN 1969, AND, ALTHOUGH IT OFTEN IDENTIFIES

ITSELF AS "ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT - POPULAR LIBERATION FORCES(ELF-PLF), IS IN FACT SEPARATE FROM AND IN COMPETITION WITH ELF. SINCE RECENT OUTBREAK OF FIGHTING, HOWEVER, FIELD UNITS OF ELF AND PLF HAVE BEEN JOINING FORCES. ALTHOUGH POPULAR PRESS FACILELY CHARACTERIZES ELF AS -MUSLIM- AND PLF AS "MARXIST", SUCH DESCRIPTIONS ARE SOMEWHAT MISLEADING, SINCE BOTH MOVEMENTS ARE PRE-DOMINANTLY -BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY MUSLIM, AND BOTH USE MARXIST JARGON. NEITHER CAN THE GROUPS MEANINGFULLY BE DISTINGUISHED ACCORDING TO NATURE OF THEIR SUPPORTERS,

SINCE INFORMATION AS TO WHICH ARAB STATES SUPPORT WHICH ERITREAN GROUP IS BOTH CONFLICTING AND OVERLAPPING. WHILE PLF CAN FAIRLY RELIABLY BE DESCRIBED AS SLIGHTLY MORE MARXIST IN ORIENTATION AND SLIGHTLY MORE CHRISTIAN IN MEMBERSHIP THAN ELF, BOTH GROUPS ARE PRIMARILY ERITREAN NATIONALIST IN MOTIVATION. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GROUPS STEM LARGELY FROM PERSONALITY CLASHES BETWEEN LEADERS.

3. ELF AND PLF HAVE TRADITIONALLY DRAWN GREATEST SUPPORT FROM SYRIA, IRAQ AND LIBYA. RECENTLY LIBYA HAS BECOME CHIEF FINANCIAL BACKER OF INSURGENTS, REPORTEDLY PROVIDING DOLS 5 MILLION WORTH OF ARMS IN LAST THREE MONTHS. AS TENSIONS INCREASED IN RECENT MONTHS, AND CONFRONTATION BEGAN TO APPEAR INEVITABLE, MORE CONSERVATIVE ARABS, PREVIOUSLY SUSPICIOUS OF RADICAL SUPPORT FOR INSURGENTS, HAVE NOW ALSO BEGUN TO PROVIDE SOME SUPPORT TO ELF AND PLF. SAUDI ARABIA AND KUWAIT, AND EVEN QATAR, ARE REPORTED TO HAVE PLEDGED LARGE SUMS FOR MEDICAL AND OTHER FORMS OF ASSISTANCE.

4. CURRENT STRUGGLE IN ERITREA IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE FOR EXTENDED PERIOD WITHOUT DEFINITIVE RESOLUTION. INSURGENTS NOW CONTROL MOST OF ERITREAN COUNTRYSIDE AND GOVERNMENT TROOPS HOLD THE CAPITAL OF ASMARA, THE PORTS OF ASSAB AND MASSAWA AND SEVERAL HEAVILY GARRISONED PROVINCIAL TOWNS. STALEMATE LIKELY TO CONTINUE FOR PROTRACTED PERIOD, ALTHOUGH ABILITY

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OF ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT TO MAINTAIN ITS POSITION IN ERITREA MAY BE ERODED IF OTHER SERIOUS INTERNAL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS ACCUMULATE, INCREASING TEMPTATION TO SOMALIA TO PURSUE ITS TERRITORIAL CLAIMS AGAINST ETHIOPIA BY MILITARY MEANS. INSURGENTS ARE TOO STRONG FOR ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT TO PUT THEM DOWN BY MILITARY MEANS ALONE. BEST PROSPECT FOR PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT WOULD

APPEAR TO BE THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS BASED ON WILLINGNESS OF ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT TO RESTORE TO ERITREANS SIGNIFICANT DEGREE OF AUTONOMY THEY ENJOYED UNDER FEDERATION WHICH EXISTED FROM 1952 UNTIL 1962, WHEN FEDERATION WAS ABOLISHED BY HAILE SELASSIE, ERITREA WAS ABSORBED AS 14TH PROVINCE OF ETHIOPIA AND ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT WAS FOUNDED. OFFICIAL OBJECTIVE OF BOTH LIBERATION GROUPS IS COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE FOR ERITREA, BUT MANY INSURGENT SUPPORTERS - ESPECIALLY CHRISTIANS, WOULD PROBABLY ACCEPT OFFER OF FEDERAL

STATUS AS A REASONABLE COMPROMISE. SEVERAL ARAB SUPPORTERS, NOTABLY SAUDI ARABIA, AS WELL AS NEUTRAL ARABS LIKE EGYPT, SUDAN AND NORTH YEMEN, WOULD PROBABLY ENDORSE SUCH A SOLUTION IF COMPROMISE GENUINELY OFFERED BY ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT.

5. WITH REGARD TO REFTTEL QUERIES, PRESENT CHARACTER OF INSURGENT GROUPS IS RHETORICALLY RADICAL AND WE ARE CONCERNED THAT, IF THEY ARE SUCCESSFUL IN ATTAINING INDEPENDENCE, THE GOVERNMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT ERITREA MIGHT ALIGN ITSELF WITH ITS RADICAL PATRONS AND MAY BE HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY LIBYA, SYRIA, IRAQ AND PDRY. FURTHERMORE, SUCH GOVERNMENT WOULD PROBABLY DEPEND ON HEAVY SUPPORT FROM SAME SOURCES TO MAINTAIN ECONOMIC VIABILITY. LATE-BLOOMING SUPPORT BY CONSERVATIVE ARABS WILL NOT OFFSET HEAVY DEBT ELF AND PLF ALREADY OWE TO RADICALS. FINALLY, ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT ERITREA WOULD NOT BRING AN END TO INSTABILITY IN THE AREA. DESPITE SUPERFICIAL SHOW OF SOLIDARITY IN FACE OF COMMON ENEMY, THE DEEP DIVISIONS ALONG RELIGIOUS (HALF MUSLIM-HALF CHRISTIAN), ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC LINES IN THE ERITREAN POPULATION COULD EASILY REASSERT
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THEMSELVES, LEADING TO AN EXTENDED STRUGGLE FOR POWER AND CREATING FERTILE GROUND FOR FURTHER RADICAL INROADS. INGERSOLL
UNQUOTE INGERSOLL

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ORGANIZATION & MANAGEMENT, LIBERATION FRONTS, POLITICAL PARTIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 10 MAR 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: CunninFX
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975STATE052676
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: NEA/ARN:DAKORN
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750084-0371
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750366/aaaacheg.tel
Line Count: 157
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ORIGIN NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 75 MUSCAT 153, 75 (NOTASANA'A 471
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: CunninFX
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 29 JUL 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <29 JUL 2003 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <24 NOV 2003 by CunninFX>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: THE WAR IN ERITREA
TAGS: PINT, PINS, ET, XF
To: BEIRUT
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006